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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 SHENYANG 000175

SIPDIS

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DEPARTMENT FOR INR, PRM, INL, EAP/CM, EAP/K, G/TIP

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TAGS: [PREF](#) [PREL](#) [PINR](#) [PGOV](#) [KS](#) [KN](#) [CH](#)

SUBJECT: LATE AUGUST TRIP TO THE DPRK/CHINA/RUSSIA BORDER
AREA

REF: (A) SHENYANG 28 (B) SHENYANG 145

Classified By: CONSUL GENERAL STEPHEN B. WICKMAN. REASONS:
1.4(b)/(d).

1.(C) Summary. Recent visits by the Consul General,s to Jilin City, Changchun and the ethnic Korean enclaves near the DPRK border offered a window on conditions along the Sino-North Korean border. Senior officials said the economy in the border areas had improved and that undocumented immigration had abated or was under control. Other contacts, however, admitted that the border was porous, trade stagnant, and the DPRK economy stressed by the poor harvest and new floods. End Summary.

2.(U) Taking advantage of a trip to the Third Annual Northeast Asia Investment and Trade Expo in Changchun, capital of Jilin Province, the Consul General paid brief visits to Jilin City and three towns in the Yanbian Ethnic Korean Autonomous Prefecture -- Yanji, Tumen, and Hunchun -- August 28-September 2. We were permitted to drive the CG,s vehicle only as far as Jilin City, traveling to Yanji by air and driving to the other towns accompanied by Foreign Affairs Office (FAO) officials in their vehicles (para 14, below).

Yanji

3.(C) In an August 30 meeting, Yanbian Party Secretary Deng Kai (Han ethnicity) and Vice Governor Li Longxi (Korean, until recently Jilin,s Vice Governor) stressed the growing prosperity of their region. More than USD one billion in remittances poured into Yanbian last year, and per capita bank balances and consumption spending was as high or higher than in Changchun. They reported that trade with North Korea continued to increase, while conditions in the border areas had improved from the crisis years of the early 1990s.

4.(C) Yanji Party Secretary Jin Yongmo (Korean) went on in a similar vein, at the same time enthralling our FAO handlers -- none of whom had ever met the earthy cadre) with tales from his old border haunt of Helong City. (At one point during dinner Jin launched into an impassioned plea for Communist Party responsiveness to the needs of the people and the imperative to rout out corruption in all its forms. This emboldened one of the FAO officers humbly to request that Yanji,s old fleet of small-size &coaster8 class buses be replaced with full-sized models, even if profits were

reduced. Jin was very receptive.)

5.(C) Taking his cue from his bosses, FAO Chief Xu Zhengbing (ethnic Korean) used the occasion of an informal farewell dinner to debunk the &inflated reports on the number of &illegal migrants from North Korea reportedly living in the area. At various times during the long event he said: &We ethnic Koreans can tell at a glance -- or certainly as soon as they open their mouths to speak -- when someone is from North Korea. How could there be tens of thousands of such people in Yanji or the Yanbian area without our knowing it? In the early 1990s, North Korean beggars were a common sight everywhere. We used to give them and our relatives across the border food and assistance in kind; now we just send them money. There,s a real cash economy in the DPRK now and they can get anything they want. We can tell you the real numbers privately, but we can,t condone these wild exaggerations from South Korean and other media.8

6.(C) Our FAO hosts also insisted that the Yanbian authorities treated any migrants detained on the Chinese side humanely. When we noted our concern over the fate of the migrants when they were returned to North Korea, Xu said the horror stories regarding harsh treatment were either exaggerations or things of the past; the DPRK had become quite tolerant. Xu said his staff had investigated one case brought to their attention by the South Korean Embassy in Beijing and found the charges to be completely bogus.

17. (C) On the road the next day, Ms. Chi Yanhua, a Japanese-speaking FAO official from Hunchun who maintains frequent contact with relatives in the DPRK and who has traveled to Pyongyang recently, sounded a slightly different

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note. She said the border was essentially &unguarded on the Chinese side and that North Koreans came across frequently to engage in petty thievery or find work. Often they would steal a cell phone, use it while they were in China, then sell it to another migrant before crossing back. She recounted one story in which a DPRK &migrant had pedaled a stolen bicycle 50 kilometers across the border together with a his haul of only a few hundred renminbi.

Tumen

18. (C) Tumen Party Secretary Piao Songlie (ethnic Korean) insisted that trade with North Korea was developing steadily across the narrow bridge into Onchon on the DPRK side of the river, but he was eager to change the subject. Vice Mayor Yan Zhihong was somewhat more affable, but he focused on the business opportunities in Tumen. This included a thriving vocational training school set up by a Korean-American from Los Angeles that brought in children from all over Jilin and even Heilongjiang, teaching vocational skills and providing assistance in obtaining jobs in South China, Korea, and Japan. (See ref A for more details.)

19. (C) During an aside at the Tumen River land port (on the bridge at about 10:30 on August 31) the senior border patrol officer in charge (apparently an ethnic Han) said traffic was slow of late and that rail trade had trailed completely off. He noted that trucks from Tumen could only drive as far as Namyang, where goods were offloaded onto Korean vehicles. He also said there was a large market in the DPRK port of Rajin-Sonbong where packages were broken down for sale and distribution elsewhere in the country. We were on the bridge for only about 20 minutes or so, during which one jeep crossed) a returning Chinese vehicle. We left one group of three peasants (apparently North Korean) huddled at the customs shack on the Chinese side clutching a few cardboard boxes of goods.

10. (C) On our way out of Tumen, Ms. Chi pointed out the border patrol detention center where DPRK &illegals were

housed prior to their return to North Korea. She said it was a pity that her repeated attempts to gain permission for us to visit the site had failed, since the treatment there was really outstanding. She said she even knew of a Tibetan migrant who had pretended to be North Korean so he could spend time in the facility and get three square meals and a comfortable place to stay until he was found out and sent packing.

Hunchun

¶11. (C) Hunchun Mayor Jin Xiangzhen (ethnic Korean) seemed more comfortable than his poorer Tumen cousins during a meeting and luncheon that trumpeted prospects for development of his obviously vibrant city. On the road back from the fortified point where North Korea, Russia and China come together at the mouth of the river, we saw three, half-size containers coming crossing back into China from the land port leading, eventually, to Rason. Mayor Jin had complained that the road was nearly impassable and said he continued to seek agreement with the DPRK on funding a road-building project. But Hunchun had to use the Rajin-Sonbong port (?) because capacity at the Russian port (do you mean Hunchun,s land port to Russia?)was also limited.

¶12. (C) At Hunchun,s land port to Russia about 30 minutes before closing (4 pm) the same day, we saw two full-sized containers just before they crossed into Russia. Mayor Jin had complained about &laziness,8 unnecessary checkpoints and paperwork on the Russian side, as well as a lingering dispute between the state-owned Russian National Railroad and the &private8 investor in charge of the railway to the Zarubino port prevented maintenance and expansion of the infrastructure. (A few days later in Changchun, the Russian Deputy Consul General said he thought the dispute would be settled &soon.8)

Changchun

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¶13. (C) On September 1, Jilin Academy of Social Sciences (JASS) President, Doctor Bing Zheng (Han Chinese) told us he had noticed a marked improvement in economic conditions in North Korea during his second visit to the country in December 2006. At the formal seminars in Pyongyang, the North Korean side had even presented data showing that their agricultural harvest had reached their targets. Privately, however, Dr. Bing said his contacts admitted the harvest was much lower than the previous year, adding that the recent floods had dealt a serious blow to the economy. Dr. Bing had postponed until mid-September a JASS-sponsored symposium on developments in Northeast Asia so that the DPRK side could participate, but he said he had just been informed that the scholars had to remain in Korea to help with reconstruction activities.

Some Roads Are More Open than Others

¶14. (C) As usual in this part of China, obtaining approval to drive our consular vehicle became an odyssey of its own. In early August, we had requested permission to drive our vehicle from Shenyang to all the points in our itinerary, but Jilin FAO informed us late in the month that &Beijing8 had not approved our driving beyond Changchun. When we said we were going to check with Beijing and hinted we might call off the trip, Jilin FAO said they had not really asked the central government but based their decision on regulations requiring that the Liaoning FAO approve and notify them directly. When we asked Liaoning, they seemed mystified at first but then regretfully informed us) again at the eleventh hour -- that they could only secure approval from the &relevant authorities8 to drive as far as Jilin. The expressway from Jilin to Yanji was not finished, and they said the decision was to ensure our safety. On the road, our contacts told us the expressway is due to open in the autumn

of 2008. We can hardly wait.
WICKMAN